

NATIVE WILDFLOWER REQUIREMENT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q. What is our operational definition of “native wildflowers”?

A. Because no definition was given with the 1987 STURAA, we asked that question in a 1993 survey of all State Departments of Transportation. Of the 45 replies, some 25 use a definition similar to “those herbaceous flowering plants that were known to exist in a region or a State at the time of European settlement”. Since the survey, the Federal Native Plant Conservation Committee, an interagency group formed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 1994, has defined “native plant species” as **“one that occurs naturally in a particular region, state, ecosystem, and habitat without direct or indirect human actions.”** As a result of this MOU, Federal Highways expects this definition to be used by State agencies. Having a common definition will aid in decision-making and guide seed growers concerning our needs. Whatever the definition, most State Highway Agencies will need a plant expert on staff to help match native plant species to the site conditions of any landscape project.

Q. Under what conditions will waivers/exceptions be granted?

A. On October 5, 1993, the Office of Environment and Planning stated “Because of the importance of these benefits, **no waivers** are being granted for the STURAA requirement. After seven years experience with native wildflowers, it was thought that the original reasons for waivers had been overcome in the planning process of any project. That opinion remains valid.

Q. Should volunteer participation be encouraged?

A. In 1973 the Operation Wildflower initiative was announced. Some States continue the program of working with volunteer groups to plant wildflowers to this day. Because of FHWA’s interest in public-private partnerships, we continue to encourage partnering with volunteer groups in the spirit of Operation Wildflower. These partnerships can promote support and ownership, as well as get more done. Through careful planning and selection of safe planting sites by State Highway Agencies, we expect to see more volunteer participation.

Q. How can maintenance conflicts with wildflower plantings be resolved?

A. When maintenance forces are included in the design process and educated about the goals beyond beautification in planting native wildflowers, maintenance forces will be supportive and help manage the plantings. Be considerate of mowing regimes when siting and designing a wildflower planting.

Some states have actually legislated “reduced” mowing policies. In these States, frequent mowing is only allowed on safety strips and sight lines. Major mowing is limited to accommodate wildlife rearing seasons, often to the month of September alone. Other States have voluntarily, in conjunction with economic limitations, reduced mowing to safety mowing, noxious weed control, and brush suppression.

This strategy has allowed natural revegetation on many roadsides, encouraging the return of native wildflowers and grasses already in the seed bank or neighborhood.

Q. How does the 1/4 of 1 percent requirement really work?

a. Although native wildflowers and grasses are encouraged as erosion control, restoration, and vegetation management seeding, the STURAA requirement only applies to landscaping. The State, in accordance with paragraph 12 b of FHPM 6-2-5-1, must assure that the costs associated with the native wildflower seeding amounts to at least **1/4 of 1 percent of the total cost**. The Project Status Record is to be documented to reflect these costs.

b. The amount spent on native wildflower plantings are to be recorded using

Work Type Code Y005.

c. Compliance should be determined during review of the project's plans, specifications, and estimate (PS&E). The seed specification, planting rate, overall seed quantity, and installation method will form the basis for the wildflower cost estimate.

d. There need not be an associated highway construction project to plant wildflowers. The State can program a landscaping project, specifically for wildflowers, using a typical landscaping action. The expenditure requirement of the STURAA is automatically met since wildflowers account for 100 percent of the landscaping cost.

e. Federal participation is available at the level associated with a regular landscaping project.

f. If an organization or individual volunteers to plant or donate funds for planting native wildflowers on a landscaping project, the State still must meet its expenditure requirement. This could be done by providing services associated with planting, i.e. design plans, site preparation, installation, or maintenance during the establishment period.

g. There is no time limit as to when wildflowers are planted on a landscaping project. If the project is programmed for and includes specifications for planting native wildflowers, a later planting season is permitted to allow for weather, availability, and other variables that could compromise native wildflower establishment.

Q. Why is design of native wildflower plantings important?

A. Good design will aid in the success of the planting and its acceptance by the traveling public. On rural sites, design that considers the adjacent and historic landscape will include diversity and naturalness that will lessen the impact the road corridor makes through the countryside, as well as enhance the local character of the rural environment. In urban sites, design must also honor the adjacent and historic landscape and consider more formal, garden-like designs that enhance the man-made beauty of the City. Although a "new aesthetic" is emerging in America, sensible design is needed to move us from the more traditional aesthetic that the public accepts at this time. The public tends to accept design that appears controlled and taken care of.

Q. Why is the use of local or regional native species important?

A. Experience shows that native wildflower and grass species which are native to an area are well adapted to the climate and other variables of that area. The species still must be matched to microclimates of the project to assure successful establishment. From the design staff to the construction inspector, all should have access to an expert who understands each plant species life history, environmental tolerances, establishment requirements, and long-term management needs. Consequently, these native species decisions should be made on a site by site basis.